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Casino arcade reopening hailed as "step forward"

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BY **NANCY SHIELDS**
COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

ASBURY PARK — Beachgoers can once again stroll, run and pedal through the Casino arcade, the boardwalk link between Asbury Park and Ocean Grove that — except for a few years in the mid-1990s — has been closed after a tornado-like thunderstorm ripped the north end of the building in September 1986.

Asbury Partners, the developer that owns the classic building, made the repairs necessary to get it open by the City Council's deadline of Memorial Day weekend. On Thursday, officials from Asbury Park and Ocean Grove held a celebration of the progress.

The developer also has more than a dozen stores, restaurants and beach galleries operating in the old boardwalk pavilions, while oceanfront and Wesley Lake condominiums and town houses are under construction.

The opening of the Casino walkway already has attracted people who at one time came north on the boardwalk to Asbury and then turned around. Similarly, Asbury Park residents once again have their boardwalk passage to the south.

"Look at this," said Councilman John Loffredo, gesturing to the people walking on the boardwalk to the north and at the activity at First Avenue Pavilion stores. "Two years ago it was empty. Today, we have people just out to enjoy a weekday on the boardwalk."

"It's another gateway opening up, another step forward," Mayor Kevin Sanders said. "The city is truly coming back."

Asbury Partners reinforced the inside of the arcade, using wood and steel. A safety net runs across the arcade under the roof. The walls are decorated with pictures of the city's past and promises for its future. The boardwalk, which the city owns, was rebuilt last year.

Among the people walking through the passageway were Sean Mills, 26, and Julie Gannon, good friends from Ocean Grove.

"It's nice in the morning when I run and can run through," said Gannon, whose husband, Paul Elyseev, is a longtime Asbury Park lifeguard. "And it's nice to see people on the boardwalk again."

"This is a main artery that had to be re-opened," Deputy Mayor James Bruno said, "and this city demanded that they (Asbury Partners) get it re-opened. . . . I welcome all Ocean Grove residents to come to our Fourth of July fireworks."

Neptune Mayor Thomas Catley said he is a lifelong resident of Ocean Grove and remembers the days of walking through the arcade to Asbury Park.

"We're looking to bring those good days back, and we hope this momentum between the two towns can carry over to development on West Lake Drive and Springwood Avenue," he said, speaking of another major artery the two towns share.

Both Asbury Park and Neptune are trying to develop the blighted Springwood-West Lake area into new stores, homes and a school.

During the years the Casino arcade was closed down, pedestrians could go through an uninviting alleyway between the Casino and the old boardwalk power plant. But people usually stopped and turned back north or south.



(STAFF PHOTO: TANYA BREEN)

Asbury Park City Manager Terence J. Reidy celebrates yesterday during the official reopening of the Casino arcade walkway.

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"People who stopped at the gates of the Casino before now can traverse through, and when they get to the Asbury side, see a vibrant, lively, beach community," said Larry Fishman, chief operating officer of Asbury Partners.

Asbury Partners and the city plan a major rebuilding of the boardwalk pavilions, Convention Hall and the Casino, all of which the developer owns.

Fishman on Thursday said the Fifth Avenue Pavilion will be the first renovated, and the goal is to have that done by next summer. Rebuilding the pavilion at the end of Second Avenue also is planned in the near future, Fishman said.

It is still not clear if the eastern portion of the Casino, which extends out over the beach and has greatly deteriorated over the past 30 years, will be saved or rebuilt.

Loffredo said Thursday that the estimated cost just to secure and save the building is \$30 million.

For about three years beginning in 1992, the city made some repairs and tried to reopen the arcade, but it had to be shut down a few years later when engineers said the only way to open it safely was to remove the roof altogether, an estimated cost at that time of \$90,000.

On Thursday, Allyson Estes, on leave from her job as a pastor at First United Methodist Church, sat at an outside table eating pizza with her 2-year-old daughter, Myleah.

"This is very exciting," she said of the new boardwalk amenities. "It certainly makes it much easier to bring a 2-year-old to the beach."

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